

Walking the Precipice

Danielle Hardt and I have been friends and colleagues for over a decade. As chairperson of the English Language Arts Department at Starpoint Middle School in Western New York State, she's worked beside me to plan and execute countless professional development initiatives. So it was fitting that she was sharing her lunch hour with me the day the news first began to crawl out of Washington D.C. and Albany: New York State's plan was approved. We were officially racing to the top.

In that moment, we had yet to understand the implications of this achievement. Both of us taught through reform efforts in the past, and those very different experiences were our only context for the future that awaited us. It was easy to make assumptions.

"It sounds ambitious," I admitted that day.

"It does," she smiled confidently. Hers was a department that was historically undaunted by change. "But we've got this," she told me, and I believed her.

And then, the Metrics and Deliverables document was released.

I remember reviewing that document with a group of administrators in a neighboring district, wondering quietly how so many outcomes would be achieved in what seemed like such a short period of time. I also wondered who would be responsible for leading such efforts and how these leaders would plan and execute such complex work.

As a consultant, I've historically served a handful of local school districts by providing professional development opportunities including input and design sessions, instructional coaching, and lesson study. In the most ideal settings, multi-year strategic plans define and align our efforts to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. I often enter the picture as the lead facilitator of such initiatives and over time, I intentionally build internal

capacity to sustain what matters most of work together even after my time of service to the district has passed. Sometimes, this involves mentoring those who will assume my role after I leave. Three years ago, I could not imagine how to go about building the kind of capacity needed to meet the demands outlined by the New York State Department of Education at the start of this massive reform effort.

Many of the teachers and administrators I supported across the handful of districts I worked in long-term had much to be proud of, due in large measure to their consistent commitment to job-embedded professional learning models. This compelled them to take risks, tolerate discomfort, and revise their thinking, their work, and instructional practice in response to the evidence they gathered about the needs of their students. I knew that there were many people capable of leading Race to the Top efforts, but all of them were carrying full plates of their own, so I suspected that my history within these schools would put me on the front lines as a facilitator of the work ahead. I also suspected that designing a theory of change that could help teachers meet the State's intended outcomes while sustaining professional learning, growth, and job satisfaction would quickly become a daunting task. Considering how to accomplish all of that while protecting students from the unintended consequences of high accountability added more complexity to this new world I was entering.

"Do you have any idea how much testing we're going to have to do?" This was the very first concern raised during the very first Race to the Top strategic planning meeting I facilitated. "Our drop-out rates are going to soar." Everyone in the room nodded in agreement.

"This is just another flavor of the month," a few teachers in a different district suggested. "No one can meet these expectations. It's too much too soon."

And of course, several more offered the meager assurance that Race to the Top would soon disappear. Even I conceded that yes--perhaps it would.

“But, what then?” I wondered aloud. “We need to consider that potential reality. We need to plan smart here or when it ends, it will take a good chunk of anything we establish with it.”

“I think we need to go into our classrooms, close our doors, and teach however we want to,” another voice rose, and a handful of others smiled. “Best advice I was given in undergrad!”

I took a deep breath.

There was counting.

Lamaze.

“What we really need is a strategic plan,” administrators knew, shifting their eyes in my direction. “We’re hoping that you can help us create it.”

So, that’s how I found myself positioned on this precipice, staring quietly into the torrent that is Race to the Top. As mandate after mandate began to crash and swirl around every district in New York State, I watched some educators lose themselves in waves of high emotion. Others began charting their escape route from the swelling sea of chaos. And still others dove into it from edgy bluffs of uncertainty or high towers of confidence. All of them: head-first, eager to comply as quickly as possible. I watched in silence. I asked a lot of questions. I shared my concerns and invited conversation about the unintended consequences of any step forward. I laid low for a long time, wrestling with my own fear and uncertainty before making what was, in retrospect, a very wise decision: I decided to use the ARCS Framework to guide my planning.

Aligning to a Greater Vision

“What is your vision of the graduate you hope to produce?” I asked the first group of teachers and administrators I worked with. “What will your legacy be? How will you leave this field? What will you be remembered for? How will you matter?”

These were such critical conversations, and these were the most important decisions we made in service to students that first year. They were the most important decisions we made in service to ourselves and our profession too. How many talented teachers will leave the classroom this year disillusioned by assumptions and misinformation about what it means to be highly effective and what it will take to get there? How many potential teachers are we alienating by putting accountability and standardized test performance ahead of all other priorities? And how much blame will we heap on state and local leaders before we recognize the power that each of us has to ensure that this race is run **well** in our classrooms and schools and districts?

Challenging teachers and administrators to establish a clear vision inspired mild rolls of the eyes from some corners of nearly every room I entered three years ago, but in the end, my intentions were clear: we would define a collective vision for our work together and how it would influence the students we intended to serve and ourselves. We would keep that vision at the front of every decision we made together, and rather than buckling under the weight of our current reality, we would commit to a far different mind-set: we would approach Race to the Top as an opportunity to achieve our vision. And we would strip it of every bit of potential it provided us to do exactly that. At the end of the day, if we were suffering, if our kids were suffering, if our communities were suffering, I didn't intend to blame the State or local administrators. I intended to reflect on what I could have done better or differently. I want to help the teachers that I serve do the same. Not because the responsibility is theirs alone, but because there is power in that realization, and now more than ever, teachers need to be empowered.

"Those who lack vision will act out of compliance first, and as their careers unfold, they'll sacrifice the important things they've established to every mandate that sweeps in and out of their districts," Joanne once suggested, and I've never forgotten this. This is the work of alignment, the first dimension of the ARCS Framework.

My initial conversations with students, teachers, and administrators tapped deeply into their desire to produce graduates who were self-motivated learners, critical consumers of information and powerful contributors to their communities. Teachers explored the potential to use standards in service to *that* vision, and they committed to making that happen. Instead of rushing to the determination that the Common Core Learning Standards limited opportunities for creativity or authenticity, they recognized the power they had to create a different future for their students. They sought alignment between what the standards demanded and what they longed to provide in terms of learner-centered instruction, engagement, and authentic assessment. During this time, I made my first efforts to ensure Representation. This is the second dimension of the ARCS Framework and one that inspires leaders to access the voices of those their work will influence the most at the moment their voice will matter the most.

When the focus shifted to APPR, many kept their vision at the front of their pre and post-assessment design process. These were the teachers who designed performance tasks instead of tests, and in the end, the data that their tasks produced deepened our perspective about students' strengths and needs in ways that were far more revealing than the evidence that emerged from the abundance of multiple choice assessments that far too many students languished under in other districts and departments that same year.

So, this was a good beginning. Sustaining our work together demanded attention to several other dilemmas, however: I knew from the start that whatever we accomplished would have to influence student performance positively. Making the accomplishment of the Metrics and Deliverables an end unto itself was short-sighted if this was the ultimate goal. In addition to this, I suspected that teachers would have to feel increasingly satisfied about the work they were doing and the influence that it was having on student achievement and engagement levels in order to remain genuinely invested over time. Allowing performance to assume a greater priority than job satisfaction or student engagement was dangerously tempting inside a system

of high accountability, but in my experience, all three drivers are critical to lasting progress. I had a hunch that failing to attend to all of them would render Race to the Top little more than exercise in compliance that produced nothing in the way of improved performance. True reform is driven and sustained by high levels of student and teacher engagement. Establishing cultures where all learners thrive isn't simply a nice idea. It's key to high performance. Culture is the third dimension of the ARCS Framework.

A Unified Plan from Many Demands

I anticipated another bump in the long road we were headed down as well: meeting multiple mandates in a very short period of time quickly created the potential for competing initiatives, carving pathways to completion that would leave teachers feeling pulled in too many different directions. I needed to ensure that the work of one dimension would align with and empower the work of others. During that first year of the initiative, NYSED articulated these expectations for all districts:

- Align local curricula and assessments to the Common Core Learning Standards and the six instructional shifts that underpin them
- Establish data warehousing systems
- Implement rigorous teacher evaluations
- Ensure that teams of teachers use data to inform practice

Rather than putting all four of those wheels in motion at once, teachers and leaders in some of the schools I serve immediately identified the use of data as an area worth investing in first. If we were to design curricula or use assessment in service to learners, it made sense to begin with a thorough investigation of what evidence suggested their strengths and needs might be. Teachers who were eager to demonstrate growth during their evaluation process immediately recognized the potential that this approach held for them as well. So, our work began with the

deliberate re-alignment of the Metrics and Deliverables outcomes. Using data to inform practice was our entry point, and as we began this work together, we used what we learned to begin aligning and testing curricula and designing assessments. This enabled us to establish a strategic plan for systemic improvement from a document that initially felt like the articulation of many discrete and potentially competing demands (see figures)

Driven by Data or Informed by Inquiry?

Once the plan itself was complete, I began to consider what it would mean to execute each phase of it with quality. As our entry point was data driven instruction, I began a careful review of Paul Bambrick-Santoyo's text, *Driven by Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction*, which was endorsed by the New York State Department of Education and showcased in Albany during the summer of 2012 Network Training Institute. Managing director of Uncommon Schools, Bambrick-Santoyo facilitated courageous, evidence-based explorations of student performance that inspired successful interventions and dramatic achievement gains in schools throughout the country. His texts provides a framework for data-driven decision making and tools to support professional development planning and the execution of such plans.

I found his articulation of the following "Eight Mistakes that Matter" particularly compelling, as I've witnessed their appearance in my own work and that of other colleagues and service providers over the years. They include:

- Inferior interim assessments
- Secretive interim assessments
- Infrequent assessments
- Curriculum-assessment disconnect
- Delayed results
- Separation of teaching and analysis

- Ineffective follow up
- Not making time for data

His honest exploration of “false drivers” that offer the appearance of change but which often do little to influence performance resonated with me as well. Like many, I’ve sought total buy-in from all stakeholders, and in rare moments, I’ve even achieved it. My early experiences with data analysis typically happened at year-end with quantitative assessment results that functioned as mere autopsy data. I’ve participated in high functioning professional learning communities, and those experiences taught me much about identifying dysfunction. At the time of my reading, I considered myself a fairly experienced user of data and facilitator of data dialogue. So, I appreciated Bambrick-Santoyo’s deceptively simple premise: when we create quality interim assessments, analyze them in order to identify needs, and intervene in response to the needs that are surfaced, learners thrive. It’s been my experience that when these three achievements are made, school cultures begin to shift as well.

Amid all of Bambrick-Santoyo’s recommendations, those pertaining to identifying root causes of ineffective analysis gave me greatest pause. Within these examples, my greatest struggles with data analysis returned to life. The importance of ensuring alignment between the standards, the assessments we give, the analyses we conduct, and the feedback and interventions we provide is critical to improvement. In my experience, this alignment is something that few educators know how to achieve. This results in years of lost time and schools full of lost children.

This was my reality in the fall of 2011, as many of the middle and high school English Language Arts and elementary grade level departments that I serve began functioning as inquiry teams. Their work together not only met the expectations for data driven instruction mandated by New York State and supported by Bambrick-Santoyo’s work, it did so in a way that

connected to and informed the work we were doing with curriculum design, instruction, and assessment as well. What we discovered during our inquiry team meetings inspired our implementation of the Common Core Learning Standards, our exploration of the six instructional shifts, our review and revision of local assessments, and our changing definition of quality professional development. The findings that emerged from inquiry team meetings became a catalyst for other reform efforts, creating continuity between the different domains of the Metrics and Deliverables. Illustrating these connections and the potential of this work flow to the administrators and teachers I serve provided a level of clarity that eased overwhelm and simplified the planning process. Addressing concerns about the quality of the data that we were analyzing head-on kept teachers invested as well.

This began when teachers revealed a significant lack of confidence in what quantitative assessment data seemed to be suggesting about student performance. In many cases, extenuating factors influenced results, including massive waves of assessment fatigue that rippled through several buildings I worked in during the spring of 2013. Many students disclosed the fact that they were not invested in the assessments they were taking and that, in fact, they were simply responding blindly without even reading the passages or the items presented. This was hardly surprising. Many middle and high school students in New York State took upwards of 35 selected response assessments during the 2012-2013 school year. These disclosures made reliability a questionable venture, as did our limited experience with the reporting systems adopted by school districts and the analysis reports provided by the companies that districts purchased assessments from. In short, the quantitative data available to us were bad data. Analyzing bad data could have led to bad intervention. Moving forward with this knowledge would have been irresponsible.

More importantly, our past experiences taught us that when we framed hunches about student needs from trends in New York State Assessment data, STAR assessment data, or

interim assessments constructed primarily by selected response, we emerged from the process with greater clarity about the types of items that learners seemed to struggle with, but an abundance of unanswered questions about why this was happening and what we might do to intervene effectively. What was often worse was that judgments were made quickly from such data and the interventions recommended were often common practices that had been tried over and over again without any measure of success.

I wanted teachers to leave our sessions with increased levels of confidence about what data were suggesting and armed with promising intervention strategies that honored the vision they had for the graduates they would produce and the legacies that they would leave behind. I doubt that self-motivated learners grow out of systems that maintain an over-reliance on selected response assessments, and it is difficult to assess any learner's ability to be a critical consumer of information using such measures. Most importantly, many of the teachers that I worked with were eager to help learners produce real work for authentic audiences. It became clear that fulfilling the mandated requirements while honoring our vision demanded the use of qualitative assessment measures.

Triangulating our data enabled us to form better hunches about the needs of learners. It also enabled us to use the results from the authentic assessments that actually engaged the learners we served. And when trends appeared across the varied measures that we pulled on, teachers grew increasingly confident in the hunches that we were drawing about potential points of intervention.

All of this inspired an important shift in teacher mindset relevant to data analysis: we agreed that data do not tell us anything but rather, they conjure critical questions about student learning, the work they produce, and the relationship between the results we are noticing and what occurred within and beyond the classroom. If, as Bambrick-Santoyo suggests, high quality interim assessments inform increasingly effective interventions, then triangulation can only

improve our chances of success. It's through the examination of multiple measures that trends are recognized, hunches confirmed, and interventions sharpened with far greater precision than the findings from any one measure might enable.

Lesson Study: Coming to Know the Core and Studying the Six Shifts in Practice

As the work of inquiry teams began, teachers in every district I serve were also in the midst of aligning their curricula to the Common Core Learning Standards. At the State's urging, this happened by way of unit design. In those districts that established inquiry teams, the units that we designed attended to the needs that emerged from our inquiry work and promising practices intended to empower our interventions. Where did we begin to identify those practices? From the six instructional shifts that underpin the Common Core Learning Standards.

"It's like we're killing three birds with one stone," a middle school teacher lamented. "In the past, our curriculum mapping work or unit design sessions happened separate from data analysis work which was separate from intervention planning. Often, different teachers were involved in each of those processes. So, some of us knew how kids were struggling, and others had expertise to share about how to intervene, but we were never in the same room and our curriculum and instruction never addressed any of those issues consistently. Letting the findings from our data work inform our interventions and guide our curriculum design is far more efficient. It all feels connected, finally."

And it did, particularly after lesson studies began. This phase of our inquiry work challenged us to design research-based interventions that aligned to the findings from our data and test them in the classroom through the application of a Common Core aligned lesson. These lessons provided opportunities for the group to study instructional practice, including the use of formative assessment.

Lesson study is a professional development protocol adapted from the work of Japanese educators. It enables small groups of teachers, administrators, and even students to design, review, observe, analyze, and refine authentic units and lessons. During lesson study, the effectiveness of a lesson is assessed. The focus is not a single teacher's practice or performance but rather, on the way that a collaboratively designed lesson or unit performs in service to learners. In my experience, this approach significantly reduces the anxiety that often accompanies other professional development approaches, including event-based workshops that can't attend to application and one-on-one instructional coaching, wherein teachers often feel singled out for intervention if forced to participate. Every member of the inquiry teams that I led participated in lesson study, including administrators and staff developers. Teams determined who would facilitate the lesson, and those engaged in the study practiced the principles of clinical observation, taking care to capture what was seen or heard without judgment. This shifted perceptions about professional development and leadership considerably.

Rather than approaching professional development as a series of events wherein an expert delivers content to participants in order to ensure compliance, lesson study returned **learning** to the center of the professional development experience. In the most ideal settings, teachers collaborated with me to design a lesson or a unit. The design aligned to their vision while attending to the Common Core Learning Standards and the relevant instructional shifts that underpin them. Important discoveries were made regarding the connection between what teachers and students valued and the potential for the Common Core to empower them. Teachers and students assumed an inquisitive stance within the classroom as the facilitator taught the lesson, capturing specific observations and anecdotal data. Opportunities for quality formative assessment were embedded within the lessons, and after they concluded, the group established criteria-specific hunches about the strengths and needs of learners, using the varied

data that was collected. Action plans were designed in response to what was learned, and teachers returned to their classrooms better prepared to leverage student strengths and intervene in response to their needs.

The first phase of this work unfolded during data dialogue. Teachers used evidence to support their hunches about the strengths and needs of learners. Evidence was drawn from multiple measures and often included trends noted in the behavior, learning, and work of students in classrooms. At times, groups chose to examine similar data relevant to the behavior, learning, and work of the teachers, administrators, and staff developers involved in the study. Some chose to investigate specific questions relevant to these learners as well. As data were examined, questions like these were pursued:

- What are our strengths, gifts, and talents? What are those of our students? How do we know? How do they might they compliment or conflict with one another? What else can we learn about this? What evidence could we gather during our study?
- What does our current evidence suggest about our needs and the needs of learners? What else can we learn? What evidence can support that learning?
- What does our current evidence suggest about the quality of the data that we are using to inform our interpretation of student strengths and needs? We do need to learn about assessment and data in order to develop increasingly accurate hunches?
- We are about to commit to improving learning and performance relevant to specific and critical skills and content. How do we determine which skills and content are most critical?

Once the group defined a set of meaningful learning targets from the data explored in phase one, they collaboratively designed or reviewed a unit. Then, teachers purposefully determined which lessons within the unit would be studied and debriefed. The group committed to observing the lessons in their entirety. As lesson study typically proceeded the data analysis phase of our inquiry work, teachers were often eager to design and study lessons intended to test specific interventions.

Groups reached consensus about how each lesson would unfold, relying on their own vision, previous practices that seemed to improve performance, and research-based practices that held promise. This phase of the study provided opportunities for teachers to carefully unpack the Common Core Learning Standards and the six shifts that underpin them. In my experience, this is critical, as the standards and the shifts often prove themselves to be powerful interventions in and of themselves. It's been my experience that they inspire high levels of engagement as well.

Once the design work was completed, the group began to anticipate how students would respond to it. Predictions were made about the behaviors they would see, performance of learning targets, and potential points of difficulty. The group decided how the facilitator would attend to these issues if they arose during instruction.

At the end of this phase, the group determined what data would be captured during the lesson and who would make a study of each point considered. For instance, initial Common Core lesson studies typically involved a careful exploration questions similar to those that follow. Teachers were invited to study just one of those focal points, and care was taken to ensure that each element was attended to by at least one (or ideally two) people within the group. This was also a good time to distinguish observation and data collection from drawing conclusions or forming judgments. At this point in this process, lesson study remains about the former rather than the latter:

- How are learning targets made clear to students? What do you notice about student behavior relevant to this target?
- How does formative assessment take place during the lesson? What do you notice about students as they engage in formative assessment?
- How is the total, active participation of all students accomplished? How is this accomplished in ways that do not threaten or shame learners?
- How are students of varied ability levels engaged in the close reading of sufficiently complex text?
- How is background knowledge BUILT via text rather than activated via talk? What do you notice about students as they move through this experience? Where do you notice learners connected back to this text later in the lesson? How?
- What questions are asked during this lesson? Script them, as well as student responses.
- How is writing used as a vehicle for critical thinking and analysis during this lesson?
- What did you notice about readers when asked to read independently? What did you notice about readers when supported by shared reading experiences?
- What do you notice about levels of engagement and displays of frustration throughout the lesson?

As groups moved into the classroom, one member assumed responsibility for teaching the lesson. I was typically invited to teach first, and my hunch is that teachers who are new to lesson study may establish a greater comfort level with the process by asking staff developers to be the first to teach. As groups move through additional cycles of inquiry, responsibility for teaching should be gradually released to the group and eventually, the staff developer can exit the process entirely.

As lessons began, teachers captured the data they previously committed to. The learning targets, the instructional plan, and the learners themselves are placed at the center of the study, rather than making the instructional practices and behaviors of the teacher the only focal point. During this phase of the work, some teachers quietly wandered the room, looked over the shoulders of learners, listened in on small group discussions, and discretely photographed the work of students and teachers. They were asked not interact with learners, ask questions, or coach their thinking or work in any way, though.

After our lessons concluded, debriefing began. As the teacher, I shared nonjudgmental observations relevant to my own instruction, student learning, work, and behavior. Others followed suit afterward, sharing observations and points of data captured. At this point, I took care to showcase the relationship between instruction and student learning, and I enabled all participants to share abundant connections without rushing to judgment. In my experience, this was critical, as each member of the group learned a great deal from the others. Our varied vantage points, perspectives, and purposes empowered rich analyses of lessons and many unexpected revelations surfaced during each experience. I positioned myself as a learner and a colleague throughout, intending to reinforce the notion that lesson study is a collaborative learning experience rather than a place where an “expert” comes into classrooms to show teachers how to do their work better.

Once observations were shared, the group formulated hunches about performance relevant to the learning targets. Evidence informed those hunches and was drawn from the anecdotes captured during the observation, photographs, student work samples, and other formative assessment findings. Making meaning from the data captured enabled lesson study participants to define specific implications for ongoing intervention, as needed.

Shared Expertise and Increasing Confidence

As teams completed their initial inquiry cycles, they prepared to share their process and findings with colleagues from other departments. In several districts, trends in student needs emerged across departments and appeared in dozens of data points throughout the district. In these cases, when teams joined together to share their findings and the expertise gained from their lesson studies, cross-curricular conversations were particularly meaningful, and teachers from diverse content areas began to recognize common purposes. These conversations marked an important beginning: the start of collegial learning grounded in the use of data and informed by practice and peer review.

This is where the work of Sustainability begins. This last dimension of the ARCS Framework challenges us to name what matters most within an initiative and plan in ways that will foster its growth over time—even after the initial leaders of an initiative exit the process. As I reflect on my experiences facilitating inquiry teams during the first three years of the Race to the Top reform effort, I'm certain of the need for strategic planning that creates unity from anything that feels like chaos. I'm also certain that we can shift school culture, but only when the students and the educators who live and work within those cultures feel increasingly confident in their abilities to engage, learn, and perform productively. This cannot happen when vision is abandoned on the altar of compliance and success is framed as the completion of a series of tasks. In the end, I've learned that sustaining **how** we do our work is far more critical than merely planning to get the work done. Relying on the ARCS Framework enabled the districts that I support to race well toward a top that they defined. Perhaps this reform effort, like so

many that have preceded it, will fail. If it does, I'm confident that much of what we established during its time will persevere. Not because it was mandated. Because it mattered.

- Lesson study as another unifying practice and how it differs from coaching (building culture)
- Examples from Wellsville and trends noted across content areas
- Shared expertise and collegial learning
- Revisiting data and approaching it with sharper vision and greater purpose